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If the foreign language teaching profession is to succeed in developing and using better and more pertinent means of evaluating student achievement (and, consequently, of measuring its own instructional effectiveness), teachers at every level must reexamine testing and evaluation procedures and those engaged in research and development must increase their activities. In an initial attempt to broaden and strengthen evaluation procedures, the profession could (1) study current reference books for information and ideas, (2) broaden the scope of inservice education and the application of aptitude and commercial testing results, (3) reexamine the relationship between practices and objectives as well as strategy and results, (5) be more realistic and fair in testing practices, and (6) expand testing to include evaluation of a wider range of student performance. Testing should be made an instructional function to help teachers guide instructional goals and planning and detect specific student learning problems. (AF)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE TESTING

A Call to Action

As I travel about the schools of Virginia working with teachers of diverse natures, using various approaches to instruction, and found in an equally varied range of circumstances, my observations lead me to believe that one of our greatest weaknesses in foreign language teaching is our inability to measure the achievement of our students objectively and comprehensively. This weakness is often obvious even in the teacher who, by all informal standards, is considered among the best.

Closely related to this observation is the fact that research has shown that fifteen to twenty percent of the students in our foreign language classes are underachievers; they are not performing as well for us as they are for their other teachers. That's one out of every five or six students--disturbing information!

Another disquieting story, but one which fortunately has a pleasant ending, concerns a colleague of mine. He was not considered a good student in high school and was barred from studying a foreign language until he could "pull up" his English grades. He has since taught Spanish for several years in high school and college, speaks and reads the language quite well, and is now successfully engaged in pursuit of the PH.D. degree. If he had not been persistent in his desire to study a language, his life today would probably be quite different.

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I am drawn to conclude that a major problem which the foreign language profession must attack is that of developing and using more effective means of evaluating student performance.

The highly sequential nature of foreign language learning causes the consequences of ineffective evaluation to have far-reaching implications for our students. Research has shown that this problem is more characteristic of the foreign languages than it is of any other area within the general curriculum.

The modifications which have been made in our objectives and approaches to language teaching within the past decade or so have also made our problems of evaluation more acute. I do not believe that the development of testing techniques has kept pace with our at least somewhat more perceptive insight into the language learning process.

The consequences of second-rate evaluation are obvious to our students. But have we considered these consequences in a broader setting? If we cannot accurately measure the achievement of our students, do we really know much about our effectiveness as teachers? I do not think so. I submit that one reason why so many research studies fail, why so many professional meetings are hopelessly torn by various factions, why friends argue endlessly into the night over the superiority of this method or that, is that we are not accurately measuring what we are doing. After all, if we have no accurate scale, one's guess of what constitutes a pound is as good as the other's.

The problem as I have delineated it may seem insoluble for any of us and so insurmountable that the classroom teacher will not even wish to approach it. But such is not the case. Big battles are won by the combined forces of soldiers and generals, and this must be our scheme of operation if we are to succeed in developing and using better means of evaluating students' achievement and our results. I call upon classroom teachers to reexamine their system of testing and evaluation and to upgrade it within the framework of what we now know, and I challenge those who are in a position to engage in research and development to do so in order to broaden and strengthen that framework.

Where does the classroom teacher begin? Let us turn now to consider an answer to that question. There are, in fact, many answers. I shall enumerate several which seem feasible to me, and these could be supplemented by many others. Where the classroom teacher begins in improving his testing program is not so important; it <u>is</u> important that he make a beginning.

1. A number of good reference books are now available on the subject of foreign language testing. They offer much information and many ideas to the teacher who takes the time to study them.

2. Inservice education must assume a more vital role in the development of teaching proficiency. All too often we sit back waiting for the "authority" to come and give us the answers. This approach has its place in the

in the inservice program, but I take the view that teachers as professional people can and must do much more for themselves. I would like to see us sitting down in our department or district meetings and utilizing the talents and abilities of our own local personnel in seeking out some of the answers for ourselves. With such resources as I have just mentioned that are now available on the topic of foreign language testing, we could do much to learn new testing techniques, to coordinate testing efforts and energies, and to study the results of evaluations by working together under local leadership.

3. Most of us need to reexamine the relationship between the evaluation program and the objectives which we have for our students. All too often the four skills which we strive to build in teaching are diminished to two or three in our testing program. If we say that we are teaching listening and speaking but we test only reading and writing, students will apply their study time and energy to reading and writing. Listening and speaking will suffer as a consequence.

4. More thorough study of test results would inevitably lead to improvement of test techniques and items, I believe. How many of have sat down, made out a test, given it, graded the results, and then--either thrown the test away or filed it for future use without modification? To perpetually develop new tests year after

year is professional time and human energy ill spent. To use the same unaltered test year after year is to repeat the same mistake endlessly, an unforgivable sin whatever its application. We should study carefully the results of each test item, discard those which are unredeemable, modify those which can be made effective, and file them away on cards along with the successful items for future use. The cards can then be pulled and assembled for new and improved tests as they are needed. This process takes time, yes, but so does making new tests every year.

5. Test construction, if it is to be successful, cannot be a haphazard process. The more time that is spent in reviewing the objectives of our teaching and in planning the strategy of the test in relation to these objectives, the more effective the test will be.

6. Need for more realism in testing, and, for that matter in teaching, is often apparent. Vague directions, irrelevant problems of the la-plume-de-ma-tante nature, and intellectual puzzles do not "turn the students on," to use their language. The primary purpose of tests is to reflect what our students know, and they should be carefully devised with this end in mind.

7. You perhaps have noticed that I have previously used the term "evaluation process." The terminology makes little difference, but I often deliberately use

this word to focus attention on a broader range of possibilities than the term "testing" implies. We are too prone to think of our students' grades in reference to the tests, quizzes and examinations. There are too many objectives and sub-objectives in a good language class today to confine ourselves to these highlights, or maybe I should say, to these pressure points of our grading system. I believe that by means of daily checklists, informal notations, and frequent quizzes the classroom teacher must keep more detailed records on a wider range of student performance than most of us now do. Not only would we have better information concerning our students' achievement, but we would elicit better daily performance from them and at the same time diminish some of the pressure of the dominant test-exam system. A few important grades are much more frightening than many lesser ones.

8. The problem of under-achievement which was mentioned previously is too broad and complex a topic to broach comprehensively on this occasion. Many of the suggestions already made are applicable to it, however, and I would also like to recommend that we make more extensive use of aptitude testing. We do not want to prevent students from coming into our classes; we do not yet know that much about the language learning process. But by making better and broader use of the instruments now available and by comparing the results of aptitude

testing with achievement, we would become better informed about that process. This, in essence, would be a secondary benefit. What we want to do immediately is to provide our students with more information about their potential for success and to diagnose the causes of difficulty and design remedies for them.

9. More commercial tests are now available in the field of foreign languages than ever before. In addition to making direct use of some of them, the classroom teacher would do well to become acquainted with them and utilize the best as guides in the development of his own tests.

10. A good teacher does not require the current student unrest to know that he should be sensitive to human interests and relations in education. Certainly we should be very aware of these factors as we go about the task of evaluating our students. Nothing turns a student against a class so much as a testing system which he feels is unfair to him, a fact which we should always have before us as we sit down to construct our tests.

The steps which I have proposed as initial ones in improving our evaluative system are applicable to teachers at every level: from the grade school through the graduate school. The university professor's task in improving testing is just as large, if not larger, than that of the high school teacher. I spoke earlier of seeking better coordination of language learning through improved testing; the college teacher is

just as responsible for coordination as the one at the pre-university level. Indeed, it is not the pre-university teacher who should have to make all of the concessions. In addition, the college teacher has a better environment for research and development than his colleagues at the secondary or elementary level.

Let us summarize with a few concluding remarks. A test should not only indicate what a student knows but what the teacher has taught. It should help to ascertain what the specific learning problems are and thus guide teachers in instructional planning. Testing is a function of instruction, not ancillary to it. Testing should be basically for the teacher's purposes, but unfortunately the nature of our educational system causes the student to be much more serious in his consideration of it than the teacher. And, in the final analysis, a teacher can be told by the kind of test he makes because through it he announces his set of values.

--Helen P. Warriner
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